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27 February 1954

MEMORANDUM FOR: The Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT: Staff Study "CIA Honor Awards Board"

1. You will recall that the Director requested me to take a look at the subject memorandum and to pass on to you any comments which I might be able to make for your consideration.

2. In general, I consider this Staff Study to be a pretty good one, and moreover I have no desire to bring forth a lot of "nit-picking" suggestions which might have the result of considerably delaying the adoption of an awards procedure. However, there are two or three points which I should like to bring to your attention in connection with this matter, not all of which are original with me.

3. In the first place, the memorandum draws a valid distinction between awards for valor and awards for other forms of service. The desirability of maintaining this distinction is fully acknowledged, but certain questions arise in my mind as to what forms of action (especially in cold war conditions) would be regarded as coming within the "valor" category. It is harder for CIA to draw a distinction between the two types of action than it is for the military to do so, since a ready rule-of-thumb available to the military is the question whether the act was performed on the field of battle. Under "shooting war" conditions, the job is likewise simplified for CIA, even though some tricky questions remain; e. g. is a blind drop behind enemy lines for espionage purposes an act of valor comparable to a single-handed assault on a machine-gun nest? The problem becomes more difficult under cold war conditions, since CIA operatives are sometimes called upon to subject themselves to situations involving serious physical dangers -- while normally the military is not expected to do so. One category of cold war actions would be fairly clear -- i. e. a mission (parachute or otherwise) taking the individual behind hostile lines to engage in activities and under circumstances which could result in his death or imprisonment and torture if caught. But short of this there are some situations involving operations on this side of the Iron Curtain which have a substantial physical risk ingredient. Certain of our personnel have been called upon to expose themselves to serious danger in connection with certain recent operations of a political-action nature, of the kind which you know about. Sometimes this game is played very grimly and for keeps, and there is always a good chance of picking up a lead slug in the middle of a fracas. What about these, and

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how do you equate them?

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4. Irrespective of which way the decision should go in cases of the kind just mentioned, it seems to me that there is one important principle which must be applied from the beginning and thereafter rigidly adhered to. If it should be decided that cold war actions engaged in this side of the Iron Curtain in peace-time shall not qualify for the valor award, it would not, in my opinion, matter too much if this determination were clearly made and understood by our personnel. What would have an adverse effect would be a subsequent hedging or waffling of this principle -- for example by the granting of a valor award two or three years later for a case of this kind, no matter how meritorious.

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FRANK G. WISNER  
Deputy Director (Plans)

cc: C/OP  
C/NE  
C/ADMIN-DD/P

Attachments:

1. Memo of 29 Jan/54 to DCI fr Chmn, Honor Awards Board; subject: "CIA Honor Awards Board".
2. Memo of 19 Feb/54 to GC fr [redacted] subject "CIA Medals."

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